

Dead Of The Night
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March 8, 2020
Westminster Presbyterian Church - Ontario, CA
Year A - Second Sunday in Lent
John 3:1-21

Night time. It's dark. It's quiet (depending on who lives next door). It triggers that part of our natural biological rhythms that cause us to sleep.

In our modern age of electric lights, automobiles and all sorts of entertainment options, we have partly lost touch with the primal significance that night had for our prehistoric ancestors. There was a time when we were much more a part of nature, a time when we hadn't yet learned to control our natural predators. I imagine that for many humans all those thousands of years ago, nightfall was terrifying. They became more vulnerable, more exposed, more endangered. And think what it must have been like before even the most rudimentary knowledge of astronomy was acquired. When the sun fell and darkness came, how could one know whether the sun would ever come back again?

And, every so often, even we 21st century humans get unwelcome little reminders of that visceral fear of night still embedded in our DNA. Ever come home to a dark house, unlocked the door and heard something inside? Just a little creaking noise. Could be the house settling. Or it could be an intruder. At this point in my life, I have a 100% success rate with it being just the house settling. But that doesn't stop the hairs going up on the back of my neck every time it happens.

We avoid dark alleys. We turn porch lights on when we leave. We move just a little quicker across poorly lit parking lots. And with good reason. Predators of all kinds, four-legged and two-legged, have an added edge if we can't see them coming.

At the same time, we have learned to appreciate some of the positives that night can bring. You want to go on a really romantic date? The odds are you aren't going to pick 2:00 in the afternoon. You're more likely to meet for dinner, not lunch. A moonlit night has its own set of eerie charms. Night also brings a sort of solitude. Many writers and other artists claim to do their best work between midnight and 4:00 a.m.

In the Bible, night time and darkness often play major roles and not in a positive way. When Jesus is arrested the night before the first Good Friday, He says to his captors: "Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour – when darkness reigns." At more points than I can count, Scripture contrasts the "light" of goodness with the "darkness" of evil. A lot of bad things happen at night in the Bible.

But a lot of good things happen at night as well. Jesus is born in a manger on a cold night. The Magi are guided to Bethlehem by the light of a star. In John 20, the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples who are huddling in hiding after sundown.

And then there's today's passage from John. None of the other three Gospels reports Nicodemus' visit. We are indebted to John and John alone for having this event in our collective consciousness of faith.

Who is Nicodemus? At first glance, it sure seems like Nicodemus should be a sworn enemy of Jesus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a member of the movement whose interpretations of the Law of Moses are routinely destroyed by Jesus. Not only is Nicodemus a Pharisee, but he is a member of the ruling council. When we hear these bits of background about Nicodemus, our first impulse might be to scream "RUN!" to Jesus. It seems inconceivable that Nicodemus comes with anything but malice in his heart.

But it turns out that our instinctive fear of Nicodemus was misplaced. Nicodemus does not bring armed soldiers to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus does not come with a stern warning from the ruling council. Nicodemus does not even come prepared with theological arguments against Jesus' teachings.

Instead, Nicodemus explains the purpose of his visit in these startling terms: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." Okay. There's still the outside possibility that Nicodemus is really here on a spy mission but Jesus seems to trust Nicodemus and I'm always going to go with Jesus' judgment over my own.

The dialogue that follows is one of the most familiar and often-quoted passages in all of the New Testament. Jesus' succinct statement of His purpose and His mission ring down across the centuries. These words have inspired great faith and provoked great controversy. Nicodemus, with all of his intellect and all of his learning, is confounded and confused by Jesus' words. Though many have since claimed to have complete and total understanding of what Jesus said, I submit to you that an honest reading of these 21 verses is a humbling experience. Jesus reveals much, but much also must remain shrouded in mystery, a mystery whose solution is revealed to each of us only on the day when we pass from this Earth. If you get that you are saved, you understand as much as you need to understand.

At the very end of this discourse, Jesus employs the imagery of good as light and evil as darkness. Those who do evil, Jesus says, hate the light and love the darkness because the darkness hides their deeds. But those who live by truth come into the light because the truth comes from God and they have nothing to hide.

Jesus' use of light/darkness here could not have been coincidental. Sitting before him was a man whose career was the very embodiment of darkness. Claiming to be the exclusive interpreters of God's law and its chief enforcers, the Pharisees had almost literally hijacked theological truth and twisted it to suit their own needs. Having been born and raised in the Pharisaic system, Nicodemus, for all of his raw intelligence, probably didn't really know any better. If you have lived in darkness your whole life, you have no idea that there is anything else. Jesus was the first glimmer of the light of truth Nicodemus had ever encountered.

Nicodemus was not an inherently evil man or at least he was no more inherently evil than any other flawed human being. Nicodemus had not made a conscious decision to live in an evil system, knowing that there was another choice. Indeed, Nicodemus almost certainly thought that the life he was living and the system he was serving were completely righteous.

And so we should not be surprised that Nicodemus is having some difficulty understanding Jesus' message. This is his first exposure to the light and I'm sure his mental eyes were squinting just a little. It was a lot to take in at one sitting and Nicodemus was going to need some time to think on it all.

I guess Nicodemus must have given it some real thought. If we read further on in John, we discover that there was more to Nicodemus' story. In John 7, Nicodemus is the voice of reason when the rest of the Pharisees are clamoring to arrest and condemn Jesus without a trial. Nicodemus does not go so far as to defend Jesus' teachings but he does point out that Jesus would be entitled to a fair trial before facing punishment. I'm sure that did not go down well with Nicodemus' peers.

The real kicker comes in John 19 when Nicodemus accompanies Joseph of Arimathea

when Joseph takes Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus even brings the traditional spices that were applied to the bodies of the dead before burial. For Nicodemus, that was practically an act of open rebellion.

We don't have any more details of Nicodemus' spiritual journey after his stealthy night-time visit to Jesus and we really don't need them. We can see from Nicodemus' actions later in the story that he, in fact, began to grow and move toward the light. He maybe was only inching toward the light but that was a whole lot more than most of his fellow Pharisees were doing.

In a way, Nicodemus was just the first in a long tradition of folks who could only come to Jesus in secret and under cover of darkness. The African slaves in America often gathered at night, away from the view of their masters, so that they could worship Jesus. Christianity did not die behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War because so many risked arrest and persecution by covertly following the path of discipleship. Thousands of Vietnamese Christians kept the light alive before the ban on religion was lifted by coming together secretly at night.

As flawed human beings, we will always live partially in the darkness. We can't help that. But, just as Nicodemus saw a light very dimly and moved toward the light, we too have a vision of the light. Thanks to the written Gospels and our Christian traditions, we are in a much better position to perceive that light. But we are still on a journey toward the light. However much we desire to bask fully in the light, we all still have a lot of work to do to get there.

During this Lenten season, we are very much forced to face the darkness. It is a time of contemplation of our own weakness and a time of following the darkest chapters of the Gospels as Jesus faces increasing opposition from some very dangerous people and ultimately is betrayed and executed. When we get to Good Friday, it can seem as if the light has been extinguished

completely and forever. But we must move through that darkness before we can walk into the light. On this plane of existence, light and darkness must remain in a constant state of tension with one another. And so we must remain in a constant state of tension.

Friends, we know that the light ultimately will prevail. We live in partial darkness so that we can fully appreciate the blazing brilliance of the light of salvation. It's a bumpy and treacherous road we travel to the source of the light but the joy of the light far outweighs the terror of the darkness. Let us walk that road together, straight through to Palm Sunday, Good Friday and the glory of Easter morning.